

A decade of the same-sex debate in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (2001-2011)

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Abstract

The conversation on same-sex relationships in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) has been a long and emotional one. For ten years, this denomination, amongst others, has struggled to define its own position regarding this very important and highly emotive social issue. When conversations span a long period of time, it becomes easy to digress and to lose focus of the central questions that need to be worked through. It is thus important to look back and take stock of where the MCSA has come from and where it has moved to in this debate. In this article I will give a description of the history of the debate on same-sex relationships in the MCSA by drawing on the official statements and reports of Conference of the MCSA, the Connexional Executive and the Doctrine, Ethics and Worship Committee. Reflecting on this history, this article will suggest further steps for the MCSA in its ongoing search to find grace and truth on this matter.

Introduction

It would be misleading to suggest that the conversation on same-sex relationships in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, or any denomination for that matter, has been only going on for the past decade. There is no doubt that people have been talking amongst themselves about this topic for a while. People have spoken about their own sexual orientation or that of a loved one, or even about their suspicions surrounding the orientation of a certain member of their congregation. Mostly, these have been quiet conversations, behind locked doors, (in)discreet whispers or under the protective security blanket of “confidentiality”. To speak about sexuality and faith is a sensitive matter. As for individuals, it takes courage for a church to discuss such a delicate and essentially private matter. Furthermore, there is a huge amount of risk involved by opening up the debate on same-sex relationships to the public. In this article I will outline the history of the conversation on same-sex relationships in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) during the past ten years (2001-2011).

I do so as having served on the Doctrine, Ethics and Worship Committee, which has been tasked to assist the church in finding a place where we can speak confidently about our understanding of human sexuality. In this article I will refer to some of the main events that happened in this regard during the past ten years, and as recorded in the MCSA’s official documents, which have coloured the conversation and steered the church’s understanding. Furthermore I will provide suggestions on where the MCSA may be heading in this very important discourse.

First things first – some complex considerations

Before we speak of the MCSA’s history, let us look at some facts. First, there are homosexual people in almost every congregation – that is if they have not left because of obvious exclusion. Sometimes their sexual orientation is known and obvious, while at other times it may be suppressed out of fear of being persecuted. Ministers and counsellors are occasionally faced with the situation where someone eventually opens up and says, “Reverend, I am gay”.

Second, the response of churches and ministers is largely determined by their unspoken theologies, ideologies and worldviews. The dilemma for gay people is that the church has traditionally not voiced any clear and decisive opinion on whether gay people are truly included in fellowship, or whether their participation in the life of a congregation is merely a matter of tolerance. It has, however, throughout history, voiced its clear rejection of homosexuality. There is much truth in the observation that “the church has generally stamped sexuality with a theological ‘handle with care’ and has not left sexual behaviour merely to personal discretion. The Christian community has guided its members to

practise something that goes far beyond ‘safe sex’”.¹ Although unspoken, there is a general understanding among Christians of what Christian sexuality looks like and this does not include the image of a same-sex couple living in a lifelong, committed relationship.

Third, homosexuality tends to be spoken about as a theory, a generalisation which encompasses many different forms of same-sex relationships. This, in itself is an injustice, for the complexities and diversity ranging from transvestitism to bisexuality, from transgenderism to gay and lesbianism – to name only a few – are immense and cannot be discussed comprehensively under one umbrella term. This reality becomes sobering when churches are confronted by individuals and couples who wish to make their sexual orientation known.

Fourth, we are not faced with an *issue*, but with *people*, leading to the dynamics of the conversation changing dramatically from an abstract discussion to a personalised interaction. Nevertheless, the frustration of people with a same-sex orientation with the church’s conversation is accurately portrayed in the following scenario: “... a young lesbian Christian testified before a church task force on homosexuality: ‘It’s not just another issue the church is studying; it’s my life’.”²

Fifth, if the church is to wrestle honestly and responsibly with itself regarding same-sex relationships, it cannot give simplified solutions, for example that people with a same-sex orientation should live a life of celibacy. “In its proscription of same-sex sexual expression and same-sex unions, on the one hand, and its prescription of an imposed lifelong celibacy, on the other, what the Church has to offer gay men and lesbians is a rock and a hard place, and moreover, a rock and a hard place that make no apparent sense, even on the Church’s own theological terms”.³ It is against the background of these realities that this article intends to portray the history of the MCSA’s engagement with this sensitive discourse.

An indirect start

As with many denominations, the matter of homosexuality was considered by the MCSA as one of the matters that fell under the umbrella of “human sexuality”. In the minutes of conferences preceding 2001, the matter of same-sex relationships did not feature and when it was mentioned, it was done so only in passing. The year 2001 nevertheless provided a dawning of a new era in the discussion on human sexuality and sparked the current decade-long conversation. The Doctrine, Ethics and Liturgy Committee of the MCSA reported to the Connexional Executive in 2000⁴ that it had received a document prepared by the Rev. James Gribble entitled “Chronology of Conference Resolutions on Human Sexuality” which spanned the period of 1980 up until 1999.⁵ It was noted that the “burning issue”⁶ regarding sexual ethics in society was that of sexual orientation. This is not surprising, seeing that the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa made provision for the protection of those who were discriminated against because of their sexual orientation, a protection that was lacking under the laws of the apartheid-era government. People with same-sex orientation not only asserted this right in the broader society, but became free to even declare their orientation in their places of worship. Needless to say, questions started arising in the church regarding human sexuality and the place of homosexual people in the life of the church. The Connexional Executive mandated the Doctrine, Ethics and Liturgy Committee in 2000, under the guidance of the Rev. Dr. Neville Richardson, to “... co-ordinate a study on these matters, but on the above specific issues rather than the wider issue of human sexuality in general”.⁷ Furthermore the committee was charged to develop educational material which could be used in the wider church, which had to be completed and presented to the Conference or the Connexional Executive by 2004.

¹ Robert L. Brawley, “Preface” in *Biblical Ethics and homosexuality: Listening to Scripture*. Edited by Robert L. Brawley. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1996), vii.

² Martha E. Stortz, “Rethinking Christian sexuality: Baptized into the Body of Christ” in *Faithful conversations*, Edited by James M. Childs (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 59.

³ Barry McMillan. “Dissecting the discourse: Homosexuality and same-sex unions” in *Moral theology for the twentyfirst century: Essays in celebration of Kevin Kelly*. Edited by Julie Clague, Bernard Hoose and Gerard Mannion, (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 140.

⁴ The reader may question the start of the date of the conversation on same-sex relationships as it seems as if it actually started in 2000 and not 2001. The MCSA’s Conference is held at the end (usually September) of each year and discussions and decisions are published in a yearbook which is distributed at the beginning of the following year. This then becomes the agenda of the church at grassroots level. As the Conference decision was published in 2001, I therefore suggest that the actual engaging of the church at large on this issue started in 2001. There was a period in the church’s history when Conferences were held triennially and biannually. In these cases, the Connexional Executive of the MCSA fulfilled the role and function of Conference when the Conference did not sit in a particular year.

⁵ The Methodist Church of Southern Africa. *2000/2001 Yearbook*. (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 2001), 218.

⁶ *2000/2001 Yearbook*, 218.

⁷ *2000/2001 Yearbook*, 218.

The language of the Conference resolution alone suggested that this matter had to be managed with careful consideration. DEWCOM presented a preliminary paper at the 2001 Conference, asking for a mandate from the church to continue with the exploration into this topic. The paper itself was not accepted by the Conference⁸, but the Conference accepted the proposal by Bishop Bill Meaker that the paper's key statement be retained, namely that the "MCSA seeks to be a 'community of love rather than rejection'."⁹ This statement proved to be an important cornerstone for future debate. Emotions ran high throughout the church as the Doctrine Committee sought to do this work responsibly, sensitively and pastorally. Two clear extremes started emerging – on the one hand there were those who could not reconcile same-sex orientation at all with Christian life and on the other, those who viewed same-sex orientation as a sexuality the church needed to affirm, accept and "normalise" in the life, structures and doctrines of the MCSA. The work of the Doctrine Committee was going to be received emotionally, irrespective of what the findings were going to be. Generally, the outcome was expected to legislate in either direction, thus creating a "win-lose" expectation within the church membership at large.

As if the diverse views within the church didn't make the Doctrine Committee's work hard enough, DEWCOM¹⁰ reported to the Connexional Executive in 2002 that the debate was complicated by the fact that the MCSA did not only operate in one country with a specific constitution and set of laws, but that the constitutions and civil laws of all the participating countries of the MCSA had to be taken into consideration in the formulation of the church's stance. The other countries which formed part of the MCSA were Botswana, Namibia, Mozambique, Lesotho and Swaziland. In some of these countries, and in Swaziland in particular, homosexuality is still outlawed and people are not even permitted to engage in conversation on this topic.

2003 Discussion guide

Despite the arising difficulties of emotional expectations and legislative diversity in the region serviced by the MCSA, DEWCOM tabled a document at the 2003 conference, entitled "Christians and same-sex relationships: A discussion guide for the Methodist people of Southern Africa".¹¹ The discussion guide was accepted by Conference¹² and it was directed that this material was to be used for discussion in circuits and districts.¹³ The document attempted to engage homosexuality in the trusted Methodist way by making use of the Wesleyan quadrilateral, namely Scripture, tradition, reason and experience. It is interesting that the Lutherans (ELCA) in 2003 followed a very similar approach for their discussions, using the framework: "Scripture, tradition, culture, and (considered together) science and experience."¹⁴

In the discussion document, Scripture specifically had to be handled with care, as this became the bone of contention between the polarised "extremes" in the church mentioned earlier. Any obvious leaning in the DEWCOM document would suggest an official stance by the church, leading to further division in its membership on this issue. The document did not go into any great detail surrounding the obvious texts in the Bible which seem to suggest that homosexuality is completely out of the question for Christians. It rather focussed on the different ways in which Scripture could be used in the debate, and despite its efforts not to do so, was interpreted by many as leaning towards a reading of Scripture which is inclusive of those with a same-sex orientation without dealing adequately with the questions arising from the "obvious texts". Perhaps the aim of a more subtle approach was to emphasise that concerning same-sex orientation, "... the issue is not so simple as choosing one part of the Bible and dismissing another. The goal is to be faithful to all of Scripture."¹⁵

Perhaps it would have been more beneficial if the document had given a more detailed explanation of the different texts, for it would have at least indicated that homosexuality as stated or implied in the Bible is not the same as that which we understand today. The texts could still have been quoted in argument, but at least there would have been a more informed usage thereof. The exegesis

⁸ The paper was not adequate and needed further work to be done.

⁹ The Methodist Church of Southern Africa. *2011 Yearbook and Directory*. (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 2001), 104.

¹⁰ The name "Doctrine, Ethics and Worship Committee", or DEWCOM for short, was adopted as the new name of the Doctrine, Ethics and Liturgy Committee at Conference 2001 and recorded in The Methodist Church of Southern Africa. *2002 Yearbook* (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 2001), 240.

¹¹ This document is available from <http://www.mcsadewcom.blogspot.com/2007/06/christians-same-sex-relationships.html>

¹² The Methodist Church of Southern Africa. *2004 Yearbook*. (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 2004), 74.

¹³ *2004 Yearbook*, 264.

¹⁴ James M. Childs. "Introduction" In *Faithful conversations: Christian perspectives on Homosexuality*. Edited by James M. Childs. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 3.

¹⁵ Mark A. Powell, "The Bible and homosexuality" in *Faithful conversations: Christian perspectives on Homosexuality*. Edited by James M. Childs. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 37.

and explanation of these texts are well documented, but for the sake of clarity I will briefly list these using Wink's¹⁶ interpretation.

- 1 Genesis 19:1-29, the text on Sodomy speaks about demasculating strangers by treating them like women (engaging sexually with them);
- 2 Leviticus 18:22 should be seen in the light that it was believed that male semen carried all that was necessary for life and that the ejaculation of semen anywhere outside a uterus/vagina constituted rebellion against God,¹⁷ which then also rules out masturbation, oral sex, anal sex, mutual masturbation and coitus interruptus;
- 3 Leviticus 20:13 refers to the same as the previous point;
- 4 Deuteronomy 23:17-18 speaks about male and female prostitutes involved in Canaanite fertility rites;
- 5 Romans 1:26-27 reflects the common social perception during Paul's time that all are "straight" and that homosexuality is purely a choice. The lack of understanding of sexual orientation in the Epistle cannot override the knowledge we now have regarding human sexuality;
- 6 1 Corinthians 6:9 refers to "sex for hire" by heterosexual male prostitutes;
- 7 1 Timothy 1:10 refers to the same as the previous point.

Furthermore it should have been noted in the discussion document that there is great disagreement on the English translation of the words "arsenokoitês"¹⁸ and "malakoi".¹⁹ It is commonly suggested that "arsenokoitês" refers to a list of sins where sex is used unjustly in order to exploit others²⁰ and "malakos" as referring to men who have a feminine trait of wanting to be protected, or as Josephus states, as "... men who live lives of decadence and luxury. They drink too much wine, have too much sex, love gourmet food and hire professional cooks".²¹ The ambiguity of the texts and translations by themselves shows the complexity of a biblical approach to same-sex relationships. What angered people in addition to the seemingly liberal approach to Scripture was DEWCOM's "liberal" conclusion regarding essentially what the church can teach regarding same-sex relationships. In the discussion guide it reads as follows:

(a) Things the church *can* responsibly teach about homosexuality

- (i) Homosexuality is best considered in the context of a more general Christian understanding of human sexuality.
- (ii) Human sexuality is God's good gift. Our fundamental attitude toward this gift should be more one of gratitude than of apprehension.
- (iii) There are diverse, and contrary, understandings of what the Bible says about homosexuality which are sincerely held by people of Christian integrity.
- (iv) Sexual expression is most profoundly human when it takes place in the context of a caring and committed relationship of faithfulness and trust where each partner can be an expression of God's grace for the other.
- (v) There are substantial numbers of people of homosexual orientation within the church whose gifts and graces manifest the work of the Spirit among us.
- (vi) The specific causes of homosexual orientation remain unclear, although various scientific theories about this contribute to our overall understanding.
- (vii) The overwhelming majority of homosexual people describe their sexual orientation as something they have not chosen but have discovered as an integral part of who they are.
- (viii) The dignity and basic human rights of homosexual people should be protected by the church, and the general stigmatising of such people is inappropriate in a church which understands all its members to be wholly dependent upon God's compassion, mercy and grace.

¹⁶ Walter Wink, "Homosexuality and the Bible" In *Religion in legal thought and practice*. Edited by Howard Lesnick. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). 338-342.

¹⁷ Andrew Sullivan, "Unnatural law" In *Religion in legal thought and practice*. Edited by Howard Lesnick. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). 324.

¹⁸ Used in Romans 1:26-27.

¹⁹ Used in 1 Corinthians 6:9.

²⁰ Dale B. Martin, "Arsenokoitês and Malakos: Meanings and consequences" in *Biblical ethics*. Edited by Robert L. Brawley. (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1996), 119.

²¹ Martin, 125.

- (ix) In the church's own dialogue on this as well as other controversial issues, people of conflicting viewpoints should respect one another, recognising that before the mystery of God, our knowledge and insight remain partial and imperfect.²²

The response from the Methodist Connexion to the document was overwhelmingly negative.²³ This was evident both in the resolutions from Circuit Quarterly meetings and District Synods to the Connexional Executive in 2004 as well as direct communication with DEWCOM. The responses suggested that the MCSA should adopt a position where all people are welcomed into the church's fellowship, but that same-sex relationships should not be tolerated. The Conference of 2005, however, took a much more moderate stance by stating that the MCSA was in no position to legislate on the matter of same-sex relationships and/or orientation and that the church at large should recognise the diversity of views within its midst, but dedicating itself to an "... ongoing journey of discovering what it means to be part of a church which embraces many different, and even opposing views, on this issue".²⁴ Conference then once again mandated DEWCOM to produce workshop material for congregations "... in which the issues surrounding same-sex orientation and practice are studied from different perspectives that represent the feedback that had been received thus far. Such material must be well balanced, to ensure continuing discussion".²⁵ The debate in the church was, however, going to rapidly shift direction because of a dramatic change in the South African legislation on marriage.

²² DEWCOM. *Christians and same-sex relationships: A discussion guide for the Methodist people of Southern Africa*. 26. These points are based on the findings of the United Methodist Committee to Study Homosexuality that were authorised for publication by the 1992 General Conference of the United Methodist Church.

²³ The Methodist Church of Southern Africa. *2006 Yearbook*. (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 2006), 207.

²⁴ *2006 Yearbook*, 75.

²⁵ *2006 Yearbook*, 76.

The curveball – civil unions/marriage

As a result of a case decided on in December 2005, the Constitutional Court of the Republic of South Africa instructed parliament to address the exclusive nature of the existing marriage act, which then resulted in the passing of the Civil Unions Act of 2006.²⁶ This new legislation opened the conversation for Christians in same-sex relationships to seek the church's blessing for their relationships and for ministers (who were registered as marriage officers) to ask the church to apply on their behalf for the status of being able to officiate over the legal and religious proceedings for the recognition of same-sex relationships. The MCSA responded to the Connexional Executive in 2006 stating that although it reaffirmed the resolutions of the 2005 Conference (encouraging ongoing conversation and not legislating on the matter), the church's doctrine of marriage remained based on the teaching of the union of man and woman in such a relationship and that ministers should refrain from officiating at same-sex unions.²⁷ If the MCSA granted permission to ministers to preside over civil unions, it would have been interpreted that the church had indeed legislated in favour of same-sex orientation and practice. By denying such permission, it was then subsequently argued, it implied that the MCSA legislated in the opposite direction, namely in the rejection of same-sex orientation and practice.

The conflict between civil law and church polity in this regard is not something unique to the South African context. Lesnick describes that in most democratic countries, when it comes to considerations for marriage, there are two laws to contend with. The first is the civil law, which requires certain criteria to be met. The second is church-polity, which has its own standards. It is fully possible for a person to be married under the statutes of the law, but that such marriage is not recognised by the church or that a relationship can be blessed by the church, but not formally recognised by the State.²⁸ Again, the matter was complicated by the fact that the MCSA's ministry spans across several countries and that the legal development of one country could not prescribe ministerial practice in others.

The debate in the church, however, became increasingly emotive. Loughlin accurately describes the reason for this increase in emotion by stating that "... marriage poses a different problem from that posed by sex. The latter – same-sex practices – can be understood as private, individual behaviour, individual 'sin'; a failing that anyone might fall into. But marriage is public rather than private, an 'institution', as people like to say".²⁹

DEWCOM proposed to the Connexional Executive in 2006 that the church was in fact faced with several options in its response to the Civil Unions Act. These were:

- 1 No marriage of same-sex couples to be performed by Methodist ministers until such time as the MCSA has a clearly defined position.
- 2 The performing of same sex unions/marriages be a matter of conscience of individual marriage officers.
- 3 Ministers refuse to be registered as marriage officers.
- 4 Await the review of the legislation that will make provision for parallel marriage acts (the Conventional and the Revised Acts). Marriage officers will then be able to choose to be registered according to either or both of these acts.³⁰

Despite this recommendation, the church maintained its position and refused to give any space for couples or ministers to formally recognise same-sex relationships through the church's blessing. The conversation in the church at this point had obviously moved to a debate on civil unions and no longer focussed solely on same-sex orientation and practice. It had become apparent that the expectation now fell on the church's view of civil unions either to legitimate same-sex orientation in its doctrine of human sexuality through the acceptance of civil unions, or, conversely, implicitly to reject same-sex orientation through the rejection of same-sex marriage.

In order to address the growing discontent in the church regarding its perceived non-committal to either side of the debate, and noting that both sides of the debate presented, arguably, theologically sound perspectives, the Conference of 2007 encouraged Methodists to continue the conversation, but

²⁶ Sifiso Khuzwayo, "God or Caesar: A queer debate on interpretation in the South African Church" *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa* 17 no. 2 (2011):27.

²⁷ The Methodist Church of Southern Africa. *2007 Yearbook and Directory*. (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 2007), 50.

²⁸ Howard Lesnick, "Homosexual sex" In *Religion in Legal thought and practice*. Edited by Howard Lesnick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 321.

²⁹ Gerard Loughlin, "Introduction" In *Queer theology: rethinking the Western Body*. Edited by Gerard Loughlin (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing 2007), 5.

³⁰ *2007 Yearbook and Directory*, 168-169.

that this conversation should inform the publication of bible study material which could be used in the broader church to convey the different perspectives on this debate in a responsible manner.³¹ DEWCOM then proceeded to arrange a conversational workshop that took place from 21 to 23 October 2008 in Paarl in the Western Cape.³²

In search of grace and truth

Although the workshop was not well attended, DEWCOM reported to the Conference of 2009 that robust discussions were held "... resulting in good feedback and a mutual understanding among parties holding different views on this matter concerning the complexity of this issue and our common need for tolerance and understanding in order to offer an effective pastoral role in our communities".³³ The result of this workshop was the publication of bible study material in the form of a book, entitled "In search of grace and truth: Christian conversations on same-sex relationships."³⁴ It was envisaged that this material would be used throughout the Connexion, guiding the discussions from local bible study groups to debates at Conference itself.

Disappointingly, the church did not engage this material and entire sections of the MCSA, specifically black rural communities, refrained from discussing the issue at all, deeming it a white problem which is a taboo in black communities. This apathy in the church was starkly contrasted by acts of protest by many ministers around the Connexion, especially at the district synods of 2010. After a minister in the MCSA openly opposed the MCSA's views on same-sex marriage by marrying her same-sex partner at the end of 2009 (and who was then swiftly tried and dismissed from the ordained ministry of the MCSA), ministers objected against themselves at their synods, claiming that they did not believe and teach the church's doctrine if it meant that the church did not make space for the formal recognition of same-sex relationships within the MCSA.

The Conference of 2010 noted that although the church's proclamation of unity in diversity may be the only way to hold divergent views together, in practice it did not allow for the spectrum of diversity to be expressed either by its laity or its clergy. In fact, it made only provision, by default, for those who held an opposing view of same-sex practice, even in the context of a lifelong, committed relationship. To all intents and purposes, the church could not decree in either direction, for it would almost certainly lead to a schism. Conference then threw the ball into the court of the church at large, which had an expectation that the church should pronounce "from above". In a bold resolution, Conference instructed the entire church to make use of the material provided by DEWCOM, specifically the book "In search of grace and truth" and that the church, through the Circuit Quarterly meetings and synods propose concrete ways to the Conference of 2012 of how the MCSA could truthfully state its unity in diversity while giving the necessary freedoms for the diversity of expression by laity and ministers in its ministry.³⁵

Sadly, by Conference of 2011, very few copies of the material had been purchased in the Connexion,³⁶ which may lead to the assumption that either people had already made up their minds on this debate and did not wish to engage in the conversation any further or that the route for engaging was not ideal for honest interaction between people holding different perspectives. It may also be that to propose a way forward is an almost impossible task. At this point, it seems like the church is faced with a stalemate, where divergent perspectives view their beliefs as mutually exclusive with those from the opposing side when it comes to the practical structuring of their beliefs.

Is there a way forward?

Although the debate has lasted (formally) for ten years, I would like to propose that the MCSA should not rush into declaring its mind on this issue, if its aim is to pursue unity. It may seem presumptuous of me to even suggest a way forward for the church, but I count this response as a possible path that could be used in informing resolutions to the Conference of 2012. These proposals focus on foundational

³¹ The Methodist Church of Southern Africa. *2008 Yearbook and Directory*. (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 2008), 81.

³² The Methodist Church of Southern Africa. *2009 Yearbook and Directory*. (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 2009), 227.

³³ The Methodist Church of Southern Africa. *2010 Yearbook and Directory*. (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 2010), 213.

³⁴ Ray Alistoun, Tim Atwell and Roger Scholtz (Editors). *In search of grace and truth: Christian Conversations on same-sex relationships*. (Cape Town: Cingela Press, 2010).

³⁵ *2011 Yearbook and Directory*. 106.

³⁶ The Methodist Church of Southern Africa. *2012 Yearbook and Directory*. (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 2012), 218.

principles that can be positively steer the ongoing discussions with the view of not hampering the conversation by placing time limits on the broader debate. I thus propose the following.

First of all, the MCSA should recognise that the parameters of the debate have shifted continuously during the past decade, making it virtually impossible to find consensus within the church. The debate moved from a discussion on human sexuality, to that on orientation and practice, to marriage and civil unions, and eventually to ministers' claimed right to preside over civil unions and the rights of same-sex couples to have their committed relationships recognised and blessed by the church. The debate was complicated even more by the assumption that with every progression in the debate, if an answer was found at that level, it would then presuppose the resolving of all the dilemmas at the preceding levels. This is not feasible as each level of the debate is a question on its own, which can only be addressed responsibly if the preceding steps have been resolved.

Secondly, the attitudes of divergent perspectives in the MCSA need to be addressed. The issue of "being right" is polarising. If those in the conversation believe that their views represent foundational truths which are diametrically opposed and mutually exclusive of any other view, then the dilemma in the church will never be resolved. Common ground needs to be found. There is therefore a call for a third way, a way that advocates the perspective of a loving Christian acceptance in the debate, first of those in the conversation, but most of all, those who are being spoken about.³⁷ It is only in such a context where each person, irrespective of their sexual orientation, believes that God will convict them of the truth for the church, but also of their own sin. Repentance which leads to a willingness to engage productively cannot be left behind in this debate.

From here, the divergent views need to express their perspectives and find consensus on the question "What is the primary location of a person's identity?"³⁸ This question I believe will change the nature of the conversation from speaking about "an issue" to keeping the focus on "the person/people". For instance, do we speak of a lesbian Christian or a Christian lesbian? In the former phrase, it is implied that the primary location of identity is on "Christian". The person is therefore a Christian, who happens to be lesbian. In the latter, the focus is on lesbian, implying that the person should first be seen as a lesbian, and then as a Christian. This distinction is profound and sets the tone for the conversation. If all manage to agree that we are speaking about Christians, regardless of the superseding identity of being "a human being", the questions underlying the discussion will focus on "How do we treat fellow Christians?", "If we believe that those who proclaim to be followers of Christ display the presence of Christ amongst us, how do we speak or interact with them?" It may be argued by fierce opponents of same-sex orientation that it would be impossible to speak of a Christian as being lesbian as it implies a mutually exclusive paradox. The point is, when we find consensus on people's primary location of identity, it creates a common ground from which a mutually accepted theology can be built.

The third step is for the church to proclaim a *Status Confessionis* which will provide the parameters for the debate in the church. Boesak, for instance, claims that the Belhar confession is not only the church's proclamation against racism, but also speaks to the dilemma of gender justice,³⁹ and could provide the boundaries for the same-sex discussion as well. By having a church confession which proposes first of all the Christian principles of diversity, dignity, humanity and justice, there is a platform for the practical working out of the nature and extent of the church's inclusivity, particularly of people with a same-sex orientation.

I believe that the church will not find peace on this issue by means of polity or institutional regulations, even if time limits are imposed on such deliberations. Perhaps the change we will see in the church will be a subtle change that will eventually bring the church to a place of a broad acceptance of those with a same-sex orientation. Can it be that natural social change and growth in tolerance "in the world" will lead the church to inclusivity? I am not suggesting that the church should aimlessly allow itself to be dragged along with the social currents of the day, and therefore robust discussion in the church needs to continue. Perhaps there is value in using a Darwinian image suggesting that in this moral debate, the church needs to acknowledge that this matter is unresolved, unordered and that the church needs to resign itself to the fact that it has to spend time in the primordial soup of this dilemma. It will take time, effort and heated discussions before the complex life of this issue will emerge from the "chaos". This life will not emerge, however, if the church is uncommitted to unity, respect and the humility of knowing its place in something that concerns truths that are bigger than the limitations of its own understanding of human sexuality.

³⁷ J. Philip Wogaman. "Conscience and Ecclesial disobedience" in *The loyal opposition: Struggling with the Church on homosexuality*. Edited by Tex Sample and Amy E. DeLong. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 179.

³⁸ As asked by Stortz, 73.

³⁹ Allan A. Boesak, "The inclusiveness of God's embrace: The homosexual reality and the Confession of Belhar" in *Discerning God's justice in Church, Society and Academy: Festschrift for Jaap Durand*. Edited by Ernst Conradie and Christo Lombard. (Stellenbosch: SUN Press. 2009), 41.

Unfortunately, in the meantime, there are real men and women who are being hurt by the church's indecision on whether it is even willing to engage with its own beliefs, prejudices and fears.

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